

The Human Rights Council

Combatting the erasure of women and girls from public life in Afghanistan



Forum	Human Rights Council Combating the erasure of women and girls from public life in Afghanistan
Issue:	
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Introduction

Afghanistan is a nation which has undergone and continues to experience political turbulence, resulting in the country facing a heavy amount of armed conflict, which has left the country facing struggles and difficulties in its social and humanitarian aspects. Public life, institutions and everyday activities are being taken away from women and girls, and they have been marginalised and excluded throughout Afghanistan's conflicts. This has been the cause of Afghanistan's concerning numbers of gender-based violences. The cultural and societal norms of Afghanistan have severely affected the women and girls of the nation as they face extreme restrictions and oppressive rules which they are obliged to strictly follow. These rules prevent Afghan women from partaking in many spheres of society, which include having an excessively strict dress code, and are not being allowed to travel over 75 km without their Mahram. Jobs, public locations (parks, baths and gyms) are restricted for women, and there is also a ban on completing secondary school.

Women and girls all over Afghanistan have reported feeling invisible, isolated, suffocated and feeling like living is similar to prison conditions due to their restriction and repression of human rights. Their lack of access to public life and day to day activities has been internationally recognized as alarming and unacceptable. However, combatting the erasure of women and girls from public life needs different solutions which each address the factors that contribute to the restrictions and marginalisation. It will need a variety of solutions which include legislative, educational, economic and international measures and support.

Definition of Key Terms

Erasure

Erasure is the act of removing, for instance a group of people from a certain context. In this case, it is the removal of women and girls from public life in Afghanistan.

Taliban

The “Taliban” directly translates to “students” in Pashto, which is related to the fact that the Taliban organisation was formed by religious students of Afghanistan. The Taliban organisation is an extreme Sunni Islamic organisation that began in the early 1990s during the civil war.

Oppressive

Oppression is when an act is unjustly severe, as it often constrains or prevents people or groups from doing certain things, which frequently results in a lack of freedom and liberty, equality or human rights.

Repressive

Repression is to force in order to create restrictions to a group of people, or to control/limit their actions.

Mahram

A Mahram refers to an individual with whom marriage is forbidden due to their close blood relationship, or due to already being married (one's spouse is their Mehram).

General Overview

Afghanistan prior to the rise of the Taliban

Before the Taliban had risen to power, women in Afghanistan were completely protected under the law, and were being treated with human rights as any other country during that time period. Women were allowed to vote in Afghanistan during the 1920s, and in the 1960s, the Afghan constitution had provided equality for women. The nation was moving toward democracy, for this reason, the country was more tolerant and open, as well as women making important contributions to the country's development. In Kabul by the early 1990s, 70% of schoolteachers, 50% of the government workers & university students, and 40% of doctors in the country were women. Before the Taliban imposed the restrictions on their ability to work, Afghan women were extremely active in humanitarian relief organisations, and women can provide a pool of talent and expertise to the reconstruction of post-Taliban Afghanistan.

The Taliban

Islam has always had a tradition of the protection of the rights of women and children, as it contains specific provisions that specify women's rights in areas like marriage, divorce and property rights. The Taliban actively creates a different image of Muslims and Islam, which is not supported by other Muslims. The Taliban has reduced women and girls to poverty, worsened their healths, deprived them of their right to education, and to practise their religion whilst claiming that this is in the best interest of women and girls.

The Taliban ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, however first became significant in 1994 and took over the Afghan capital city, Kabul, in 1996. The takeover was then followed by over 20 years of civil war and political instability within the nation. The Taliban was initially thought to provide stability to the country, however it imposed strict oppressive orders which were the Taliban's misinterpretation of Islamic law. The status of women was immediately taken down after the Taliban took power in Kabul. The Taliban caused all women's universities to be closed, and forced all women to quit jobs, which economically and socially affected the country. It severely enforced a tight dress code, restricted women's access to medical treatment, and constrained their freedom to travel around the city. The Taliban also committed violent crimes against women, such as rape, kidnapping, forced marriages, which caused families to send their daughters to Iran or Pakistan for protection.

The women of Afghanistan who were living under the measures of the Taliban were completely secluded from employment and the world of work was closed for them. The working women of Afghanistan were forced to immediately quit their jobs as teachers, doctors, nurses and workers when the Taliban took over. Women were only allowed to work in very limited situations. Around 50,000 women who had tragically lost their husbands and male relatives during the long civil war in Afghanistan had no source of income, therefore, many were selling their possessions and begging in the streets in order to feed their families.

The Taliban's power in Afghanistan has one of the worst human rights violations records in the world.

The regime systematically repressed all segments of the people, and fundamental rights were denied. However, the Taliban's war on women was especially alarming.

Recent

August 2021 was when the most recent takeover by the Taliban in Afghanistan occurred. It was stated by UN experts that women's and girls' rights in Afghanistan have reverted to what it was before 2002, when the Taliban last had power in Afghanistan. Thus, the progress made in the past 20 years has been undone. Women and girls may not receive any form of secondary education, they are not allowed in amusement parks, public baths, gyms or sports clubs, and they are not allowed to work in NGO offices. They are also banned from serving in the court.

Major Parties Involved

Taliban

The Taliban is the party which has been imposing restrictive measures on women and girls in Afghanistan which actively sets back the country and its citizen's freedom. As soon as the Taliban rose to power in Afghanistan, strict laws were put in place forbidding women to take part in everyday activities.

Afghan government

The Afghan government has made efforts to combat and address the gender discrimination and inequality in the country, and to promote the rights of Afghan women. For example, the Afghan government has created an institution - Ministry of Women's Affairs - which is a lead agency promoting women's rights and advancements in Afghanistan. The efforts were made for the women of Afghanistan to have their legal, economic, social, political and civic rights, as well as being protected from any gender based violence and discrimination. The government also actively supports initiatives which are related to women's education, rights, empowerment and protection.

United Nations

The United Nations actively contributes in the promotion of gender equality and protesting against gender discrimination in Afghanistan. The United Nations has always supported, funded and backed a number of initiatives and programs which were developed and designed to better the rights of Afghan women and girls, as well as their access to necessities such as healthcare, economic opportunities and a political voice.

United States

The United States has been significantly involved in Afghanistan since its military intervention in 2001 due to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The United States also played great contributions in the promotion of women's rights and empowerment by funding educational and economical programs and encouraging the participation of political processes within women in Afghanistan. This has given the government of Afghanistan great financial and military support, which allowed Afghanistan to make important decisions to proceed in the situation. The United States congress also passed the Afghan Women's empowerment act in 2009, aiming to further the promotion of gender equality and women's political participation, as well as accessing education and healthcare in Afghanistan. The United States has financially assisted the support programs and initiatives focused on women's rights, and funded towards the education, healthcare, economic empowerment and civil society organisations. More specifically, the United States has funded the construction and operation of schools, and has provided Afghan women and girls with scholarships. The United States also invested in the infrastructure of Afghanistan, and the agriculture and economic growth to help enhance opportunities for Afghan women.

European Union

The European Union financially, technically, and logistically supported Afghanistan and supported programs which were contributing to combating gender discrimination. Initiatives which had intentions to promote women's political voices, economic empowerment and access to education, were all actively supported by the European Union.

Canada

Canada openly supports and has already committed to advancing the women's rights in Afghanistan. Canada actively aids women's organisations, as well as promotes the participation of women in peace processes, and offers support within the development of women's rights in Afghanistan.

Timeline of Key Events

Date	Description of event
1920s	Women of Afghanistan were allowed to vote, and had a political voice.
1964	Afghanistan's new constitution was adopted, which provided equality for women, and promoted women's education and economic opportunities.
1977	Over 15% of the highest legislative bodies in Afghanistan were women.
December 24, 1979 - Feb 15, 1989	The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan and the conflict and war disrupted Afghanistan's progress on women's rights, as women started to face many restrictions which were conservative and different to their previous rights.
1990s	In the capital city of Afghanistan, 70% of schoolteachers, 50% of the government workers & university students and 40% of doctors in the country were women.
September 1996	The Taliban regime rose to power in Afghanistan, which immediately implemented strict laws which were restricting and limiting women's rights. Women started being excluded from public life at an alarming rate, being denied access to education, healthcare and economic opportunities.
December 2001	A United States led alliance overthrew the Taliban government, which is when progress was made and efforts were put into rebuilding Afghanistan and developing women's rights.
2004	There was a new constitution adopted in Afghanistan which specifically promised equal rights for men and women, as well as reserving parliamentary seats for women.
2009	A law was passed which is named Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW), which criminalized any form of violence against women and girls
2014	Zarifa Ghafari - one of the first ever female mayors of Afghanistan was appointed in Maidan Shahr
2019	Afghanistan celebrated its 100th anniversary of women having the ability to vote and acknowledge the advancements made in Afghanistan for women's rights

February 29, 2020 The United States and Taliban signed a peace agreement in Doha, Qatar to bring an end to the war in Afghanistan, which also raised concerns about the impacts on women's rights and the progress thus far.

August 2021 The Taliban took over Afghanistan again, meaning that women and girls rights in Afghanistan were reverted back to what was before 2002, and the progress made thus far was undone.

UN involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

- Security Council Resolution on women and peace and security, October 2000, (1325)
- United Nations Security Council Resolution, 19 June 2008, (1820)
- UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), 3 September 1981
- UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), June 21, 1946

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

There have been attempts made by organizations and other countries to repair the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan. Countries like the United States and Canada actively fund and support the Afghan women by funding their education and healthcare, as well as promoting and building programs to empower women. The Afghan government and international partners have been building programs, setting up educational training and creating initiatives to encourage women to engage and participate in governance and decision making, and in general having a political voice. In addition to this, the Afghan government reserves parliamentary seats for women.

Education and healthcare programs have also been implemented to improve the access to these necessities for women and girls in Afghanistan. Schools have been built and funded, as well as training programs which train teachers and provide scholarships to students. Healthcare services are also being provided and funded.

After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, international partners taken initiative in rebuilding Afghanistan and the rights of Afghan women. The National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA) was founded in 2013 and was launched by the Afghan government alongside certain international partners. This initiative gave plans on how to enhance the rights of women and for them to get access to political engagement, education, healthcare and economic opportunities.

Possible Solutions

Tackling this issue requires many approaches and solutions, which may be a long term process and require funding from different sources. Efforts need to be made for girls and women to receive access to quality education in Afghanistan, indicating that schools and training needs to be implemented. These education systems need to be unbiased and a sufficient curriculum which reforms and promotes gender equality. In addition to this, awareness needs to be raised about gender discrimination in Afghanistan by the international community.

The Afghan government needs to strengthen laws, as well as implement laws which strictly protect women's rights. This is including but not limited to criminalizing gender based violence and promoting strict and harsh consequences for people who break these laws. The Afghan justice system needs to effectively address these crimes and strictly impose the consequences.

A continued international support system would also be extremely beneficial, as more countries would be willing to assist and support Afghanistan and the women and girls, financially, technically, and diplomatically. This also creates an international awareness on the importance and priority of women's rights. Similarly, international partners could also increase women's representation in fields such as politics and decision making.

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